

Reviews

CHRISTIAN MAIR. *Infinitival Complement Clauses in English: A Study of Syntax in Discourse*. Studies in English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. vii+264 pages.

This book, the first in the new descriptively and empirically oriented CUP series Studies in English Language, is a corpus-based monograph on *to*-infinitival complement clauses in English.

It is organised into four chapters: an introduction on methodological issues (chapter 1), two core chapters on *to*-infinitival clauses functioning as subjects and as complements to verbs respectively (chapters 2 and 3) and a conclusion (chapter 4).

I will start with a discussion of Mair's methodological perspective and premises. The author sets these out by asserting:

A belief that the syntactic structure of a language is *not* a well-defined autonomous formalism but closely interrelated with and partly determined by semantic and pragmatic factors (Mair 1990: 3).

Hence the subtitle *a study of syntax in discourse*. The approach to syntax Mair espouses is known as functionalism and is associated with the linguist Talmy Givón (Givón 1979). There is nothing inherently wrong with such a perspective, except when it leads the author to observe that:

[I]t is a corollary of the view of syntax adopted here that such widely unchallenged linguistic conventions as the distinction between *competence* and *performance*, or between *grammaticality* and *acceptability*... cannot be taken for granted any longer (Mair 1990: 6).

Not everyone would agree that the Chomskyan notions mentioned here have not been challenged (Hymes 1971, Labov 1972), and, furthermore, a substantial number of linguists would disagree with the conclusion Mair draws. Throughout the book often misguided sentiments such as these are reiterated and Mair feels an apparent urge to come out strongly against theoretical approaches to syntax, notably Chomsky's framework. However, from the fact that the latest Chomsky reference is 1981 it appears he really properly acquainted himself with recent work in Government-Binding Theory or Principles and Parameters Theory (Chomsky and Lasnik, forthcoming). The book thus suffers from an unfortunate intransigent orthodoxy vis-à-vis other approaches to syntax. Of course, this same intolerance is also found in many theoretically oriented studies, and one can only regret the lack of open-mindedness on both 'sides'.

A further criticism regarding Mair's methodology is that, although it is 'ideologically' guided by the functionalist approach to language, it can aptly be described as eclectic in that it does not really have a principled basis. This becomes obvious in the introductory chapter where

Mair discusses the various uses that different linguists have made of the term complement. He notes that it is not always obvious whether a particular constituent is a complement or a peripheral unit of some sort, and because there is gradience in this area with fuzzy boundaries between the various types of infinitival clauses he decides not to commit himself to a definition of the notion. Of course, complements are volatile entities, even in current theoretical work, but nevertheless it seems that defining one's terms is an absolutely minimal requirement for any type of study, whatever the sphere of investigation and methodological outlook, and one cannot simply opt out of pinning down one's terms of reference.

The lack of a secure principled methodological foundation and the refusal to commit himself to defining his terms has undesirable consequences in that it leads to imprecise and *ad hoc* statements. An example of this is to be found in Mair's discussion of (extraposed) *for*-infinitival subject clauses of the following type: *It will be necessary for me to sell my car* (Mair 1990: 40). The author rightly rejects the possibility of taking *for me* to be a Prepositional Phrase and says that:

[I]t could be described as a complex subject noun phrase, consisting of the subject-introducing particle *for* and the subject proper...

This descriptive statement is unhelpful in that it leaves the reader wondering exactly what is the syntactic status of these so-called subject-introducing particles. The possibility of analysing *for* as a complementiser is not considered.

Mair seems to be aware of the fact that functionalism is perhaps not descriptively rigid enough:

[I]t is well to remind oneself that - whatever its drawbacks - the formalist approach to syntax had [sic] one virtue. Its claims were explicit enough to allow criticism - both from inside and outside a given theoretical framework... What are the criteria to decide whether a functional generalisation works

or not? And what is the degree of rigour required even in the formulation of a functional generalisation?... Clearly, the functional paradigm cannot succeed unless the utmost effort is spent on increasingly precise descriptions of the unformalisable that are richly documented by empirical evidence (Mair 1990: 11).

One might wonder at this juncture whether *being precise about the unformalisable* is a contradiction in terms.

This monograph is not principally concerned with grammatical analysis (it broadly follows the descriptive framework of Quirk et al. 1985), but rather with explaining discourse syntactic processes. It is in this area that Mair has the most interesting things to say. A good example is his discussion of infinitival subject clauses (ISCs). There are three types of predicates that can take infinitival clauses as subjects, exemplified by the sentences below:

- (1) It is unhealthy *to be in the sun for too long*.
- (2) It is a crime *to throw rubbish onto the streets*.
- (3) You see the rising sun as a god. You know he isn't a god, but *to think of the rising sun as a god* explains something about the human feeling, about the new day coming and the excitement of the recurrence of the seasons and all that (Mair 1990: 27).

From these sentences it can be seen that adjectival, nominal and verbal predicates take ISCs. In (1) and (2) the subject clauses have been extra-posed and this is because long and/or complex phrases tend to occur sentence-finally (the principles of *end weight* and *end focus*). In (3), a slightly amended attested example transcribed from a radio broadcast, the subject clause remains *in situ*. Mair discusses the semantic restrictions on the three types of predicates in (1) - (3) and makes a number of observations regarding ISCs namely that in general they are infrequent and in the vast majority of cases they are extra-posed. The situation for ISCs depending on verbal predicates, as in (3), is exceptional. According to the author these

are less likely to extrapose and are even less frequent. There are good reasons for this. The resistance to extraposition can be explained by observing that verbal predicates tend to be quite long and informationally heavy. This is especially clear in (3) above. The subject clause in this sentence is informationally not prominent (the *rising sun* is mentioned in the directly preceding context) and hence moving it to a sentence-final position would disturb the informational balance of the sentence. The reason why ISCs depending on verbal predicates are extremely rare is that verbal predicates are usually dynamic and require an animate subject and clearly ISCs come low on what has been called the *animacy hierarchy*.

The final evaluation of this monograph is that, on the whole, it is a meritorious piece of work, very well-written and well-researched, with interesting contributions to our knowledge of discourse syntactic processes. It is, however, disappointing as far as analytical content and the rather narrow-minded methodological out-look are concerned

References

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- ANDREW SPENCER. *Morphological Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. 512 pages.

Spencer's book is a nearly exhaustive introductory to morphology, with exercises from very different languages, and recommendations for further reading at the end of each chapter. The book also contains a subject index, a name index and a language index, which makes looking for very specific information an easy and fast task. In addition, the most important terms are written in boldface the first time they appear in the text. Spencer's book presupposes little knowledge of morphology, but discusses fairly complicated issues, which can however be easily understood because of his accessible style and a gradual introduction to the most intricate aspects of morphological theory.

Morphology is a difficult subject, with a lot of complex relations with phonology, syntax and semantics; it interacts with all the components of the grammar. The borderline between phonology and morphology, for instance, is not clear at all, and a particular sequence might be considered an allophone or an allomorph depending only on the theoretical framework adopted. Spencer's book reflects all the relations morphology has with other components of the grammar (except for semantics, which receives little attention), and he reviews the most important proposals that have been made with respect to the subject from different points of view, most especially within the framework of generative grammar.